



## Nick Butcher on Fiestas and Foods of Spain. All Saints Day - El Día de Todos los Santos

---



**Death is a gloomy fact of life**, and sooner or later anyone who settles in Spain for any length of time will have to face up to the loss of someone here that they care about. We can learn from the Spanish attitude to death, which is not to shy away from it. They respect their dead, and every year they take time out to do so in a formal framework, with the feast day, on the first of November, of All Saints, known here as 'El día de Todos los Santos'. It is perhaps the most moving festival of the whole year. Like so many fiestas, it seems to fulfil a basic human need, in this case to honour and remember the people who have gone from our lives for ever



### **How do they go about this? It's extremely simple.**

Families descend en masse on the local cemetery. They take with them armfuls of flowers, which they use to decorate the front of the 'nichos' within which their loved ones lie. 'Nichos' are the niches or recesses in the walls of the cemetery where most people are buried. Soon, the whole place becomes a mass of colour and fragrance. Amid all the bustle of arranging the flowers, of fetching ladders or water, of discussing how best to go about things, you see people stand quietly in prayer or contemplation. Something about the occasion means that emotion is never far from the surface. How could it not be, with so many memories evoked by the names and dates on so many stones?



**But what has this got to do with a Christian feast day celebrating all the Saints?** It's difficult to trace the origin with any certainty. It seems that in the early centuries of Christianity there was a feast in May in some places celebrating all the martyrs. This became a more established festival in the year 609, when Pope Boniface IV converted the Pantheon in Rome into a church honouring the Virgin Mary and the martyrs. The feast day evolved into one celebrating all the saints, and in the ninth century its present date of November the first became established. In Britain they called the day All Hallows, meaning all the holy ones. The night before was All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. According to an old celtic tradition, this was the last night of the year and was the time when all the witches and wizards were about. The rituals involved in that night found their way to the United States, where they evolved into the supposedly light-hearted celebration of all things ghoulish that we know today, and which is gradually catching on with Spanish children





## Nick Butcher on Fiestas and Foods of Spain. All Saints Day - El Día de Todos los Santos

---



**The first of November** has other resonances that may explain why it was chosen to commemorate the dead. In many places in the Mediterranean the date marked the end of the agricultural year: the wine was made, the oil had been pressed from the olives, the land was exhausted, bereft of life. The date also falls forty days after the autumn equinox, (forty is a highly significant number in biblical terms) and signals a time when the really bad weather often sets in.

It was a time for country people to settle their debts, maybe go to agricultural fairs to buy stock or replace tools. In the Valencian town of Cocentaina they still hold an important horse fair on this day.

**The Ancient Greeks** believed that the underworld opened up at this time and that good spirits were allowed to ascend to communicate with their descendants. Which brings us neatly back to Spain, where candles are lit in cemeteries on the night of the first of November to light the way for visiting souls.



**As for food, the typical dishes for All Saints**, such as baked sweet potatoes or roast chestnuts, are starchy and calorific, good things to set you up for the dark, cold months ahead. Other nuts are used too: the new season's almonds and pinenuts for Cataluña's delicious sweetmeats called panellets, and almonds appear again in the marzipan paste used to make huesos de santo, saint's bones, rather gruesomely shaped and sickly.

**Perhaps most touchingly symbolic of all are buñuelos de viento**, little airy morsels of fried choux paste stuffed with pastry cream and very popular at this time.

The symbolism is in the name, which translates as puffs of wind. The Spanish words for soul, alma or ánima, both derive from a Greek word meaning precisely that, a puff of wind, something to dwell on if it's breezy on this day. ■

